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SOUTH AFRICA BARS CHURCH VISITORS

NEW YORK -- Twelve American Church leaders were denied entry into South Africa even as they prepared to depart the U.S. for a three-week visit with South African Christians.

The group, which included two priests from the Episcopal Church Center and two canons of the Episcopal Diocese of Rochester, was to have left in late July for a series of conferences, seminars and meetings exploring social responsibility and model programs in the area of religion and race.

The decision to deny the group visas was first announced in a news wire service story from Johannesburg on the day the group was to have departed. A spokesman for the Republic of South Africa's Consul General in New York confirmed that the visas had been denied but refused to state why, saying: "It is not our policy to ascribe any reason at all for denial of visas."

The planned visit was co-sponsored by the Genesee Ecumenical Ministries of the Rochester, N.Y., area and the South African Council of Churches and planning for it began more than a year ago when Anglican Bishop Desmond Tutu, general secretary of the Council, gave his enthusiastic support for the idea.

The racially-mixed group would have been a key source of information and support for the development of social investment policies -- especially those involving one of the Rochester region's major industries, Kodak. That firm and the Genesee group have been involved in conversations and stockholder resolutions about Kodak's role in supplying material to the racist Pretoria regime.

The Rev. Charles A. Cesaretti, public issues officer, and the Rev. Earl A. Neil, staff officer for the Coalition for Human Needs, were to make the trip as were the Rev. Canon St. Julian Simpkins, canon for inner city work, and the Rev. Canon James Prichard, program officer, from Rochester.

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Cesaretti expressed the disappointment and puzzlement of the group members over the arbitrary refusal. "I know of no reason why the Republic should have denied us entry. This was not a political trip, but an opportunity for us to share the experiences and perspective of the religious leadership of the country."

Bishop Tutu, who was recently arrested and fined with 52 other church leaders for alleged violations of the riotous assemblies laws and who has been barred from traveling outside South Africa, had looked forward to the visit as a chance for American church leaders to see conditions first hand. In a letter last summer encouraging the visit, he noted: "It is important for those struggling against injustice and exploitation to know that there are those in other parts of the world who care and that this concern is made incarnate in visits of prestigious people such as yourselves."

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